

## 28.4 The Influence of Italian City-States

The Renaissance began in northern and central Italy. One reason it began there was the prosperity of Italian **city-states**.

In the Late Middle Ages, most of western Europe was made up of fiefs ruled by nobles. Above the nobles were monarchs. In Italy, however, growing towns demanded self-rule and developed into independent city-states. Each city-state consisted of a powerful city and the surrounding towns and countryside.

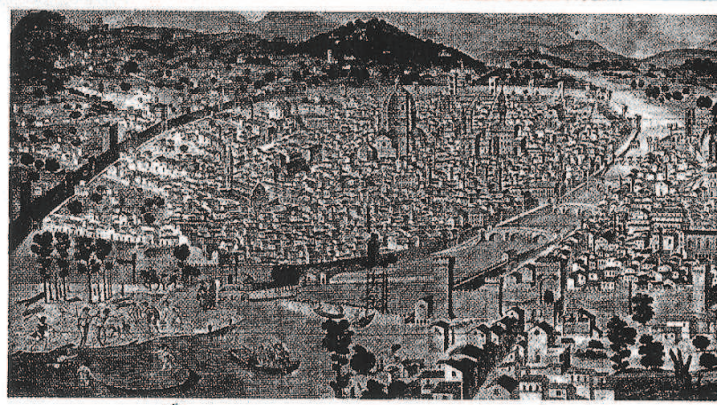
The Italian city-states conducted their own trade, collected their own taxes, and made their own laws. Some city-states, such as Florence, were **republics** that were governed by elected councils. Council members included commoners as well as nobles.

In theory, the power in republics belonged to the people. In fact, it often lay in the hands of rich merchants. During the Middle Ages, guilds of craftspeople and merchants became very powerful. During the Renaissance, groups of guild members (called *boards*) often ruled Italian city-states. Boards were supposed to change members often. However, wealthy families often gained long-term control. As a result, some city-states were ruled by a single family, like the fabulously rich Medicis in Florence.

Trade made the Italian city-states wealthy. Italy's central Mediterranean location placed its cities in the middle of the trade routes that connected distant places with the rest of western Europe. People from all over Europe came to northern Italy to buy, sell, and do their banking.

Some Italian city-states developed specializations. Florence became a center for cloth making and banking. Milan produced metal goods and armor. The port city of Genoa was a trading center for ivory and gold from northern Africa. Venice, the most powerful city-state, had hundreds of ships that controlled the trade routes in the Mediterranean Sea. Silk, spices, and perfume from Asia flowed into Venice.

The city-states' wealth encouraged a boom in art and learning. Rich families paid for the creation of statues, paintings, beautiful buildings, and elegant avenues. They built new centers of learning, such as universities and hospitals. From the city-states of Italy, Renaissance ideas spread to the rest of Europe.



This is a late-15th-century map of Florence, one of Italy's most powerful city-states. Notice the man on a hill in the lower right corner; the artist drew himself looking over Florence.

**city-state** an independent state consisting of a city and its surrounding territory

**republic** a form of government in which people elect representatives to rule in their name

Some Italian City-States During the Renaissance







## 1.2D. The Growth of Italian City-States


What do you see here? Describe the geographic features that surround the city. How is the city protected? What visual clues indicate that this is a prosperous city? Why might this city be an exciting and interesting place to live?

- In this slide we see a late fifteenth-century map showing the city of Florence. The artist has depicted himself on a hill in the bottom right-hand corner of the work.
- Changing ideals brought Europe to the brink of a new era, called the *Renaissance*, a French word meaning “rebirth” that referred to the revival of contemporary arts and letters that took place in the cities of northern Italy in the 1300s. Several factors made this region the cradle of the Renaissance. Italian cities were independent from feudal monarchs and lords because of a long struggle between the popes and the Holy Roman Emperors. Both popes and emperors exhausted funds and soldiers by battling unsuccessfully for control in northern Italy. As unceasing wars drained strength from these traditional feudal powers, cities like Florence, Siena, and Venice established supremacy over the countryside surrounding their municipalities. These cities that ruled their surrounding region became known as *city-states*.
- City-states were governed by guild members. All guild members had a say in selecting the citizens elected to run city government, though a term on the governing board usually lasted only two months. In Florence, in the early 1300s, 6,000 of the estimated 50,000 people in the city were guild members. The panel of citizens selected by their peers—called the *Signoria*, in Florence—made decisions about security, trade, foreign policy, and city planning. Positions on city councils were supposed to rotate often, but in all Italian city-states, leading merchant families vied for control of the city government. Selection of civic leaders was often shrouded in intrigue and death, as exile and assassination became a regular part of Italian politics.
- The Italian city-states capitalized on the proximity of Italy to the eastern Mediterranean world to establish strong commercial ties with Byzantine and Muslim merchants. Each Italian city-state carved out a niche in the world of trade to become prosperous centers of European commerce. Some cities manufactured a product that was sought after in Europe and the East. For example, Milan concentrated on the production of metal goods and armor. Others, such as Florence, raised capital through a flourishing cloth industry and became important banking centers, in turn using their profits to buy goods in the east to market in the rest of Europe. Still others, like Venice—which was a transit port at the mouth of the transalpine passage that linked Europe and the Byzantine world—established themselves as trade centers, attracting merchants from around Europe to their markets and warehouses, which stocked Asian goods. Italian city-states converted this



- Each Medici leader encouraged the development of the arts, becoming important patrons of painters, sculptors (such as Michelangelo), architects, and scholars. The Medici set up artists' workshops, supported young artists, and collected some of the finest works for their palaces. Under the patronage of powerful families like the Medici, the Renaissance became a time of renewed interest in the scholarship, art, and architecture of classical Greece and Rome, and a revival of public life with the participation of citizen bodies. The financial support of Italian city-states and their important families inspired a mighty upsurge in optimism, experimentation, and creativity.

**Slide 1.2D: The Growth of Italian City-States**



**How did Florence become the most influential city-state?**

- maintained thriving industry in wool and silk trade
- purchased luxury items from the East and sold them for a large profit
- sold insurance to sea traders to protect their overseas investments
- created numerous banks that made loans or exchanged currencies
- Medici family promoted trade, banking, the arts, scholarship, and civic pride

**Why were Italian city-states so rich and powerful?**

- had strong ties with Byzantine and Muslim merchants
- each city-state specialized in one commercial activity:  
**Milan:** metal goods and armor  
**Florence:** banking and textiles  
**Venice:** Asian goods
- European monarchs and nobles sought loans from merchants

**What was the Renaissance and why did it begin in Italy?**

- *Renaissance* is a French word meaning "rebirth;" refers to revival in arts and learning
- period when scholars became interested in ancient Greek and Roman culture
- Italian city-states displayed their wealth by giving financial support to artists who created works with classical themes